

JUMPERS

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CHAPTER ONE

Honk! Honk!

“Amber Ellen Nichols, you get back here right now!” The screen door of the decrepit, wood-framed house slammed shut. “You never folded that basket of laundry I left on your bed. Gabe needs his dinner and a bath, and I’m pretty sure you haven’t touched your homework.”

The petite, teenager jumped off the porch’s three steps, dashed across a patch of brown lawn, and put her hand in the handle of the black Mustang. Her mother’s words reached her ears the same moment she reached the curb.

Amber turned to face her mother as she opened the car door. “Mama, it’s my sixteenth birthday. I want to go out. I’ll take care of the laundry and my homework when I get home.” She slid into the passenger’s seat, blew a kiss to her mother, shut the door, and waved goodbye through the open window.

Once again, Elsa Mae watched through the tattered screen door as her youngest daughter drove off into the night with her friends. She looked down and spotted her two-year-old grandson wobbling toward her legs. She picked him up and kissed his cheek. “Well, it looks like it’s just you and me tonight for dinner, Gabe. How about some macaroni and cheese?”

“Charley, I’m worried. She hasn’t been home in three days. The school has called and she hasn’t shown up for classes either. She ran out of here in such a hurry the other night, I never even got the name of the boy driving that black car.” Elsa Mae poured her husband another cup of coffee and then sat down to feed Gabe who was busy with some Cheerios she’d put on the tray of his high chair.

“Don’t worry, Elsa Mae. She’ll be back. She always comes back home. Amber has the spirit of a wild horse running free in the woods. You know you’ll never tame her unless you break her spirit. I know you won’t do that to our child. She’s been like this since the day she was born.”

“Why does she have to worry me so? Why does she leave little Gabe? I know she was young when she had this precious child, but she’s a mother now; she needs to take care of her responsibilities. Maybe we were wrong in expecting her to keep the baby. Maybe we should have let Josh and Katie take him from the beginning.”

“Did I hear my name?” Josh walked into his parents’ kitchen, opened the cabinet next to the sink, and pulled out a coffee cup. He poured a cup of black coffee from the carafe still being warmed by the coffee maker. He sipped the hot brew and then asked his parents, “What about me?”

Charley put down the newspaper and finished off his breakfast. “Your mother is worried about your sister—again.” He took his final sip of coffee, gathered up his dishes, and took them to the sink. He grabbed his lunch sack off the counter and headed toward the door. “I have to go to work, Mama.”

Charley kissed the top of Gabe’s head and then planted a soft, loving kiss on his wife’s lips. “Don’t worry about her, Elsa Mae. She’ll be home tonight. I

almost guarantee it. I’ll call you later and let you know what time I’ll be home, or if I’ll be home. I love you guys.”

“Bye, honey.”

“Bye, Dad.”

Josh sat at the table across from his mother. “You want me to make you something for breakfast, sweetheart?” she asked.

Josh sipped at his coffee and played a little with Gabe. “No, Katie fed me before I left this morning. I just came by to check on you and Pops. We’ve been kind of busy this week and I haven’t heard from you, so I thought I’d swing by before work.”

Elsa Mae gently patted her eldest son’s face. “You are such a good son. I love you.”

Josh smiled. “I love you too, Mama.”

“Mama.” Oatmeal spewed from the toddler’s mouth as he spoke.

“You too, my little Gabe.”

Elsa Mae wiped the child’s mouth with a washcloth.

“So, Amber is out running around again. Mama, I told you she was going to continue this behavior as long as you and Pops allow her to get away with it. The two of you need to either make her come live with one of us, or put her out on the street. She is never going to grow up and face her responsibilities until you do. You guys are too soft on her. She manipulates you and uses you to get what she wants. She’s a spoiled brat and she runs over you guys every chance she gets.”

“I know, son. She’s young and has made some terrible choices in her life. We’re just trying to help her find her way.”

“Helping her find her way would be better accomplished with a stiff belt across her ass. She can’t keep doing this to you, Mama. She needs to buckle down and take care of Gabe. She created him, now she needs to take care of him. The longer you guys keep doing everything for her, the longer she’s going to keep running off and partying.”

“It’s her birthday, Josh. I haven’t let her go out for several weeks. I

haven’t forgotten the last time she disappeared and skipped school. I’ve been cracking down. She’s feeding and bathing Gabe, putting him to bed, and

doing her own laundry, too. She’s still in school, so we try to give her time to study.”

“I know you guys are trying to help her, but you’re not making things difficult enough for her. She still wants to be a teenager, but she can’t be that anymore. She’s a mother now.”

The screen door slammed. Amber walked through the living room to her bedroom and shut the door.

“Amber is that you?” Elsa Mae handed the bowl of oatmeal to her eldest son. “Here, finish feeding him while I go check on Amber.”

“Mama, let me go check on Amber.”

“No, I’ll be right back.”

The door to Amber’s room was locked. “Amber, let me in please. We’ve been so worried about you. Where have you been? The school called several times; you haven’t been going to classes. What’s going on, Amber? Why have you been gone so long?”

“Leave me alone, Mama. I’m tired; I feel sick. I’ll talk to you later. Just let me sleep.”

Josh came out of the kitchen. “Mama, I have to go to work. Gabe is playing with his Cheerios. We’ll be here this weekend to celebrate Pop’s birthday. The whole family’s going to have a big discussion about Amber. It’s time we do something about her behavior, all of us, not just you and Pops.” Josh kissed his mother on the cheek and left through the screen door.

“Okay, son, see you later.” Elsa Mae knocked again on her daughter’s bedroom door. “Amber, you have to go to school. You have already missed too many days. The truant officer is going to come by if you don’t go to school.”

“I don’t care, Mama. I don’t feel good and I’m tired. I’ll go to school tomorrow.”

Elsa Mae shook her head as she reluctantly left the bedroom door.

“Happy birthday, Pops.”

“Oh, thank you, everyone.” Charley blew out the candles on his birthday cake. The family was gathered around the dark maple dining room table—Elsa Mae’s favorite family heirloom.

Charley hugged his grandchildren as each one came to his side. He sliced a piece of cake for each one. “One for you, and for you.”

Elsa Mae looked around the table at her children—her family. She had been blessed with three boys and four girls, two daughters-in-laws, two son-in-laws, and eleven grandchildren. Everyone was present for Charley’s fifty-fifth birthday—except Amber. Kami, her second to youngest daughter went over and took the cake slicing responsibility over from her father. The recent college grad had just been accepted into medical school at the University of Texas in Houston. Elsa Mae looked at her with pride, stood up and said, “I’ll be right back.”

Amber’s door was slightly ajar. Elsa Mae opened it to find Amber lying on her bed. “Are you okay, Amber?” Elsa Mae sat next to her on the bed. “What’s the matter, baby?”

Amber turned to face her mother; her green eyes were red. Amber wiped the tears that had streamed down her face. “I’m okay, Mama, just still not feeling too well.”

Elsa Mae moved Amber’s brown hair away from her face. “Amber, you have been sick for several days now. I think I should take you to the doctor.”

Amber turned away from her mother. “No, Mama, I know what’s wrong.”

Elsa Mae touched her daughter’s shoulder. “What is it, Amber?”

“Mama, I’m pregnant, again.”

Elsa Mae pulled her hand back and covered her mouth. “Oh no, Amber, not again.”

“Just go, Mama; I want to be alone.”

Elsa Mae got off of Amber’s bed and walked toward her door. She turned and looked at her daughter’s back, two tears fell from her eyes. She quickly wiped them from her face before walking back into the living room. She forced a smile as she walked through the group of children wanting their grandmother’s attention. “I’ll be back in a minute, my babies. Granny needs to clean up the dishes.”

Josh noticed the red on his mother’s face and her quick exit to the kitchen. “I’ll be right back, Katie.” He paused for a moment and watched his mother busying herself with the stack of cake plates and bowls from the party. “Can I help you, Mama?”

She turned, startled by the voice. She wiped the few tears that had fallen away from her face. “Oh, Josh you scared me. No, I think I got this.”

Josh walked to his mother, put his hands on her shoulders, and turned her so that she had to face him. “Mama, what is wrong?”

Elsa Mae couldn’t hold it back. “Oh, Josh, Amber is pregnant again.”

Josh let go of his mother and slammed his fist down on the counter. “Hell no! Not again. We are going to have a family meeting right now about her.”

“No Josh, not now,” Elsa Mae cried. Today is your father’s birthday. I really don’t want to ruin his party with all this drama. I just need your support right now. I truly don’t know what I’m going to do. It’s been so hard for me, taking care of Gabe. I just don’t know how I’ll take care of another child.” She wept.

“You’re not going to, Mama, she’s going to take care of both of them or give them both up for adoption. Enough is enough, and I won’t stand for this any longer. Where is she?”

“Josh, please. Not today. Let me talk to your father and tell him. He knows nothing about this. I don’t want to disappoint him today with this news. You and Katie come over tomorrow and we will talk with Amber together.”

“Mama, we need to talk with everyone about what is going on. Everyone needs to know how she’s treating y’all.”

Elsa Mae put her hand on her son’s shoulder. “Please, Josh, not today. This is going to hurt your father so much. You know he has a deep bond with Amber.”

“Fine, Mama, but Katie and I are coming over after church tomorrow and we will figure out what to do with Amber. We are going to make sure before we leave tomorrow that she understands—no more free ride.”

“Okay, son, thank you.”

Katie, Kami, and Trish entered the kitchen with dishes from the dining room. “Here, Mama. Papa really liked the new rifle the boys gave him.” Katie could tell from Josh’s face that something was wrong. Kami noticed that her mother was tense. “Everything okay, Mama? Josh, what’s wrong?”

“Everything is fine, girls. Just put the dishes over there on the counter.”

“Yeah, everything is just fine. I’m going to go check out that new gun.”

“Did you have a nice birthday, Charley?” Elsa Mae was brushing her hair, getting ready to climb into bed with her husband.

Charley flipped through the channels on the television. “Yes, Elsa Mae, it was a wonderful birthday. It is always so wonderful when all the children are home.”

Elsa Mae cuddled up next to her husband. “Charley, we have to talk. I promised Josh I would discuss this with you tonight. Josh and Katie are coming over tomorrow so that we can all talk about what to do. Amber is pregnant again.”

Charley didn’t stop changing the channels with the remote. “When did you find this out?”

“Just today.”

“Does she know who the father is?”

“I didn’t get into details with her about any of it today. I didn’t want to ruin your birthday.”

Elsa Mae began to cry. Charley pulled his wife closer to him after finally putting down the remote. “Don’t worry, it’s all going to be okay. We will talk with her tomorrow and with Josh. We’ll figure out something. What the hell, Elsa Mae? It’s just one more baby to add to our big clan.”

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“How could you do this again, Amber? Look at what you’re doing to Mama and Pops. Mama takes care of Gabe all the time while you go out partying, skipping school, and doing God knows what else. It’s time you take responsibility for yourself and your child, I mean children. If you can’t settle down and pull your own weight, you need to take Gabe and leave.”

Amber sat curled up in a ball on the couch, as Josh paced up and down the floor in front of her. Elsa Mae sat with Charley on the loveseat and Katie stood next to them with her arms folded. “Josh, you need to calm down. Yelling at her isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

Tears fell down Amber’s face. She stared at her mother with disappointment in her eyes. “How could you tell him, Mama? You know he doesn’t like me.”

“Amber, that’s nonsense. Your brother loves you.”

“Yes, I do love you, Amber, but enough is enough. You have taken advantage of Mama and Pops long enough. I suggest that you seriously think about giving this baby up for adoption. Katie and I have talked; we will take Gabe. That way you can do what you want with your life.”

Charley raised up in his seat. “Now wait a minute, Josh. No one is going to do any of that. Not in this house. We are family and we will deal with this like a family. That unborn baby is a part of us just as much as Gabe or even you. We will come up with something that will work for everyone.”

Josh threw up his hands and leaned up against the wall near his wife. “Fine, Pops. You figure it out. You and Mama are the ones she’s taking for granted. You’re the ones who are not going to be able to retire and spend your golden years doing what you want. Because she’s a screw up, everyone in this family has to suffer.”

Amber stood up and pointed her finger at her brother. “I am sorry I’m such a disappointment to you, big brother. I’m sorry I didn’t grow up to be just like you. You’re an asshole.” Amber fell back onto the couch and curled up in another ball. She buried her face and cried.

“I think you need to make her go out there and get a job, Pops. She needs to find out what it’s like to have to take responsibility for her own life and the choices she makes.”

“Josh, no more yelling. But I think you may have a good idea, though.” Charley stood and walked over to his isolated,

distraught daughter. He took his child in his arms. “Amber, Josh is right. It’s time you stand up and take responsibility for your actions. Tomorrow, I want you and your mother to get to the doctor. Then, I want you both to check out that alternative school your mama was telling me about. It’s supposed to be only half a day of classes. I want you to go and find a part-time job.”

“A job? I don’t have any skills. What kind of job can I get, Pops?”

Josh interrupted. “You are sixteen years old. If you’re old enough to party and get pregnant, then you’re old enough to get a job. You can work at the mall or a fast food place or at a restaurant, Amber. There are a lot of things you can do.”

“Please, Mama, don’t make me do this.”

Elsa Mae looked with forgiving eyes at her daughter. “Your papa and I think that this will be best for you. I will continue to watch Gabe for you until the baby is born. Then we will look for daycare. The children need you to be a responsible mama.”

Amber jumped from the couch in anger. “Fine! I’ll get a damn job.” She stomped off to her room.

Gabe walked to his mother’s door and cried for her. “Mama. Mama.” Amber ignored the child’s pleading. Josh turned to the hallway where Gabe was crying at his mother’s door. “See? She has no idea what it means to be a parent.” Josh picked up Gabe and brought him back into the living room. “Pack him some things, Mama. Katie and I will take Gabe for a while. It will give you some time to get her straightened out, maybe.”

Katie took Gabe from Josh. Elsa Mae agreed and went up to gather the child’s things. When she returned she asked, “Katie, are you sure you want to do this?”

Katie smiled at Gabe and kissed his nose. “Yes, Mama, it will be nice to have a little one in the house again. He can play with the kids when they get home from school.”

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The NRS listens to those who are thinking of or already have runaway. Their services are confidential and nonjudgmental.

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